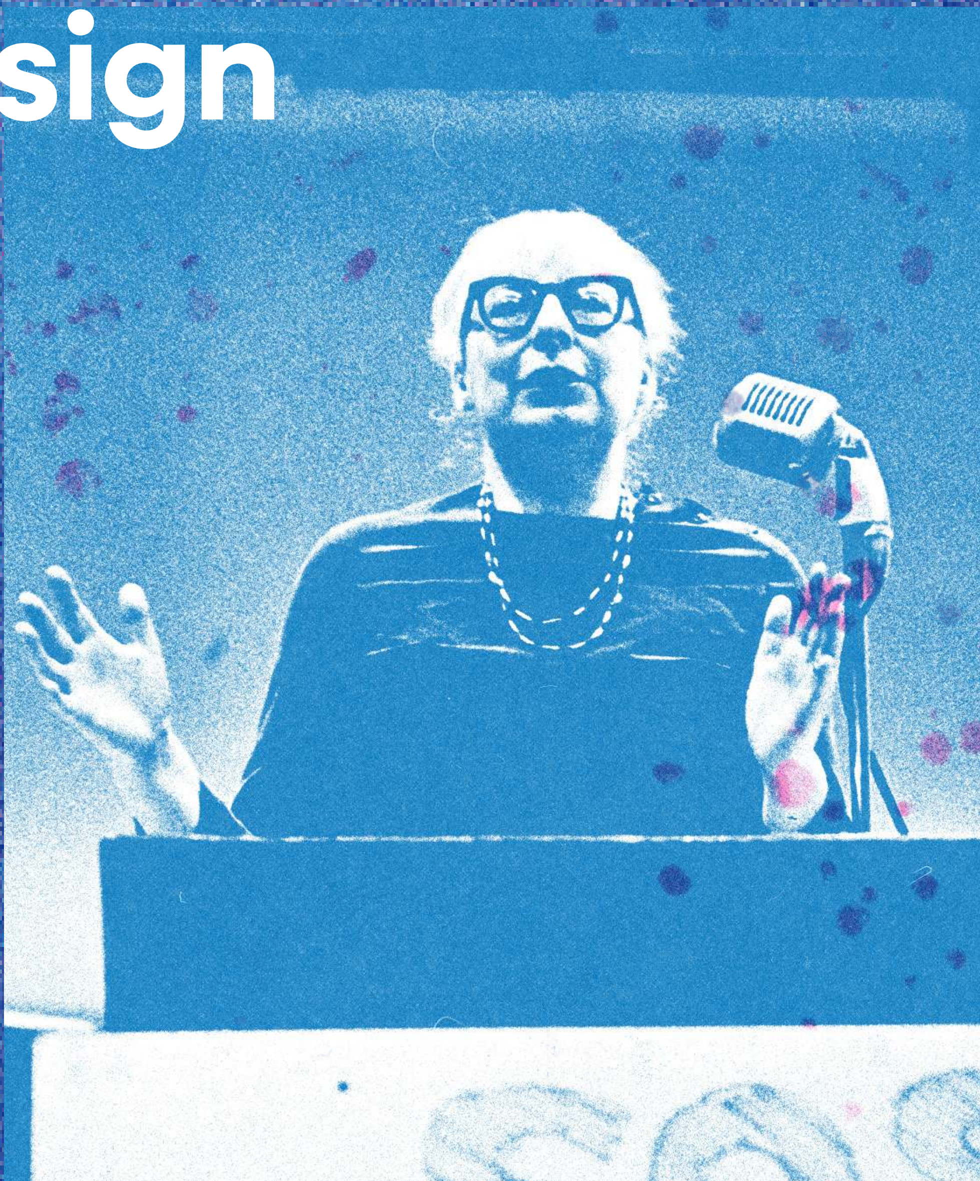
An Activist Planners Guide to Defensive Design



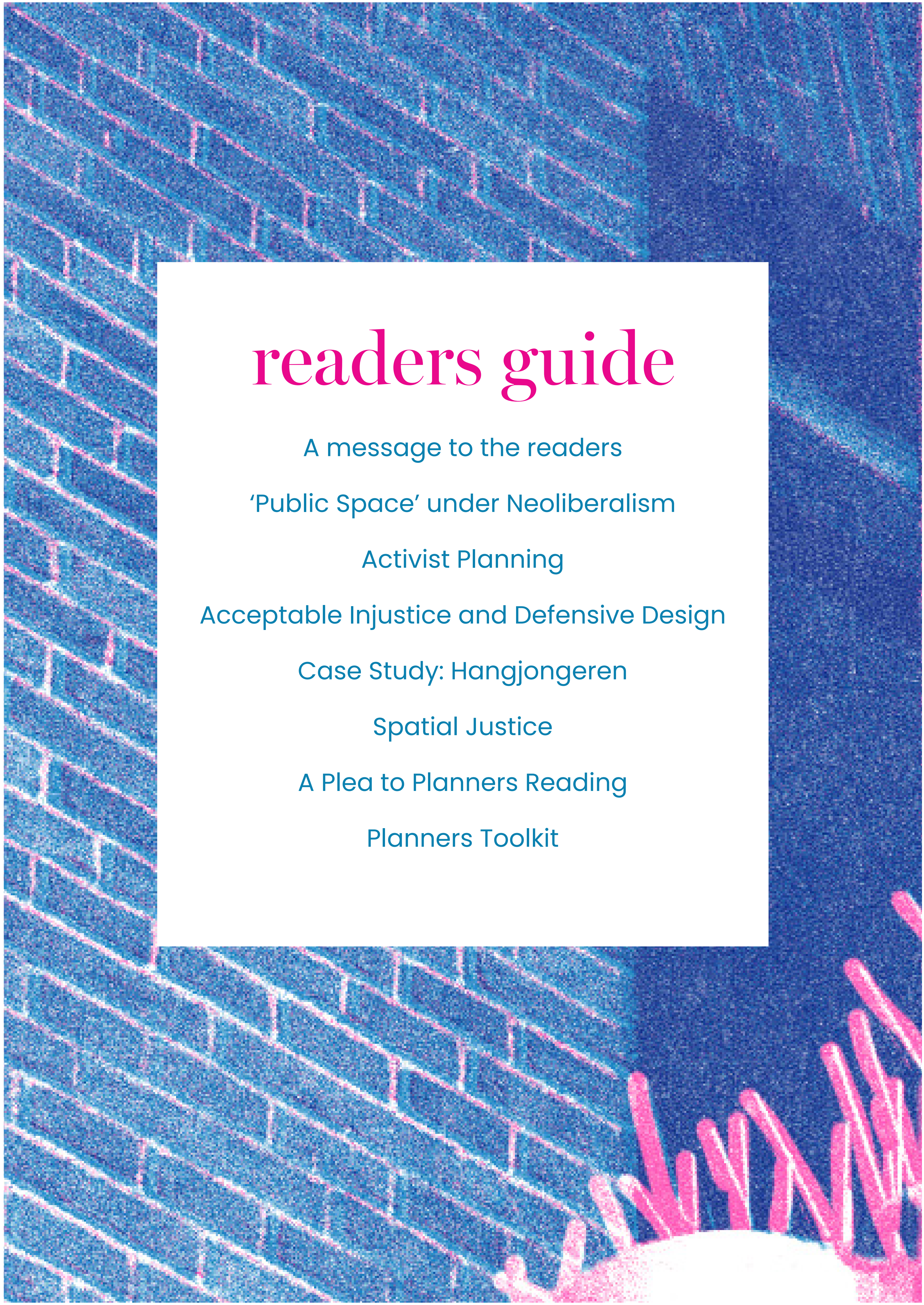
Urban Interventions: Planning for Justice? Or Just Planning?

This zine was created by Kate Lehane as part of City Matters: Urban Inequality and Social Justice (GEMCITMAT).

The majority of the images were taken in Groningen by the author in September-October 2024 as part of the GEMCITMAT group assignment.

Special thanks to Edward Freije for his InDesign support, and to Tabea Ebel and Anna Marti Estape for providing feedback.





readers guide

A message to the readers

public spaces that are hostile or defensive are not true public spaces; they are spaces intended to safeguard the economic interests of a city.

This zine hopes to make visible one aspect of increasing neoliberalisation of urban space: defensive design interventions. Inspired by recent research on hangjongeren and youth place-making in Groningen, which highlighted the lack of youth-specific spaces and how urban design interventions can either undermine or enhance young people's use of public areas. Through site analysis and observations, our research examined how design choices shape these spaces. Building on this, the zine explores how neoliberalism influences public space through defensive design interventions, how to identify these interventions, and what can be done about them.

Within this zine, you will find an introductory guide to identifying defensive design, making links with spatial (in)justice and the discipline of planning as a whole. The goal of this zine is to inspire and advocate for change in both urban space and planning practice.

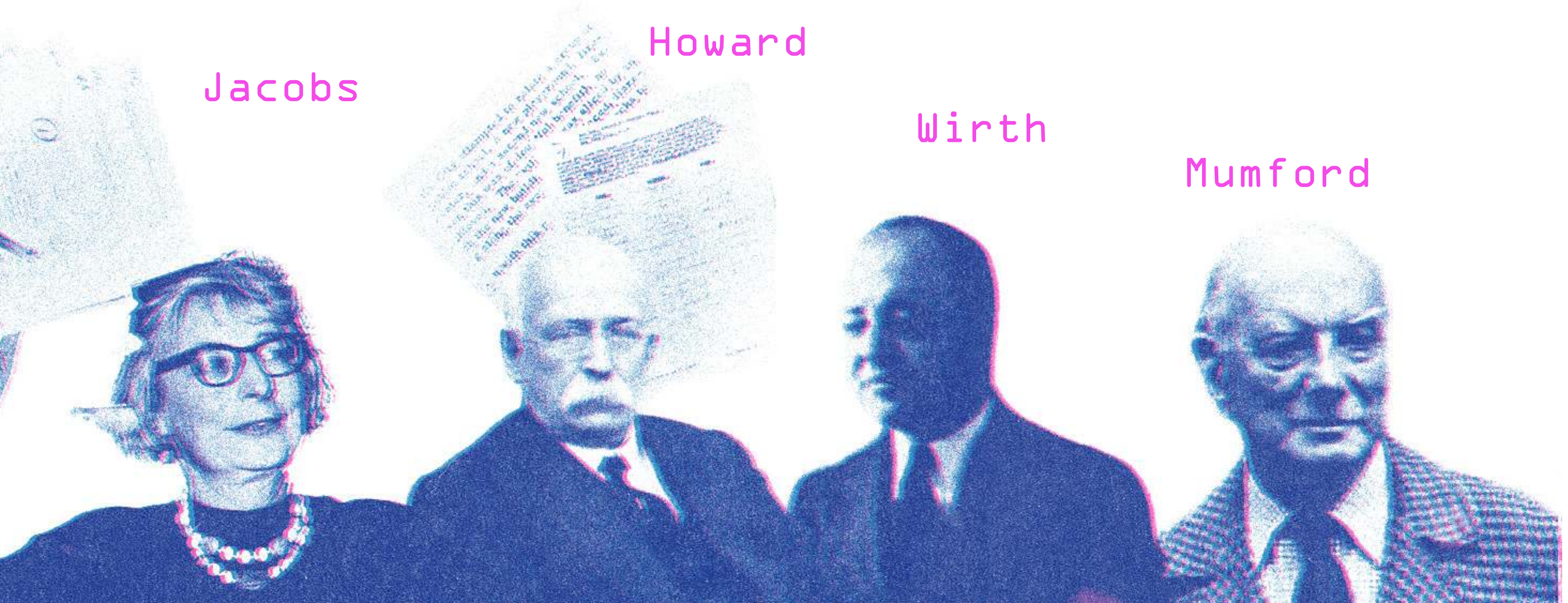


‘Public Space’ Under Neoliberalism

Urban space is contested, dynamic, and continuously shaped and reshaped by the dominant ideologies in society. The city, and how we think of urbanisation has changed drastically in the past three decades (Monno, 2016). Subsequent economic crises and the implementation of increasingly neoliberal policies have ‘revealed the environmental, economic, social and political unjust consequences of the ‘restyling’ of urban space,’ resulting in social polarisation, exclusion, gentrification, and the erasure of public space (Monno, 2016).



The domination of neoliberal planning ideology has resulted in public spaces that are increasingly defined by commodification, rather than confrontation and contestation, as originally envisioned by the great city thinkers.



The source of these consequences is widely debated, but this zine focuses on neoliberalism; a political-economic model that promotes individual entrepreneurial freedom within a system characterised by strong private property rights, free markers, and free trade (Harvey, 2005). Neoliberal planning prioritises economic optimisation over public needs, appealing to values of efficiency and rationality (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2017). Within this, urban public space becomes a central arena for capital accumulation, with public life being dictated by the forces of supply and demand (Harvey, 2012; Monno, 2016).

Accompanying this, a new form of planning practices has arisen in which planning practices are based on urban entrepreneurialism, managerialism, and consensual governance (Monno, 2016). Market dynamics, although invisible and intangible, manifest in the very fabric of our cities through urban infrastructure. In simple terms, infrastructures are material structures that facilitate the operation of society (Badenoch and Fickers, 2012). More than just material structures, infrastructures consist of institutions, routines, and discursive practices (Badenoch and Fickers, 2012). Thus, it is through infrastructure and design interventions that we can see how neoliberalism is present in society. Under neoliberalism, infrastructure is designed to make space for those who fit an entrepreneurial vision of productive citizenship, and exclude those who do not. In the case of increasingly entrepreneurial cities, defensive urban design interventions are deployed to design out those identities that are inconducive to capital accumulation; such as the sick, elderly, disabled, youth, and the unhoused (non exhaustive list).

non exhaustive list

ACTIVIST PLANNING

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Within urban politics, theories of justice are intended to ensure fair compensation and redistribution (Monno, 2016). However, under neoliberalism, these principles of justice have been replaced by a free-market ethic (Monno, 2016). Despite the pervasiveness of neoliberalism in contemporary planning; it also sparks resistance from activists, planners, and citizens alike (Sager, 2016). Activism planning is not reserved solely for the planning professionals, Jane Jacobs herself was just an impassioned citizen. According to Sager, anyone can be an activist planner so long as they provide alternatives to official planning proposals and express their ideas about future urban development (Sager, 2016).



Globally, activists have been experimenting with creative forms of collective action, finding ways to counter neoliberalism's unjust spatial and geographical consequences (Monno, 2016). Examples of social media movements like @got2goNYC, @Dutch_Hostile_Design, and @Publicspace_Detective, illustrate the power of activist planners in exposing spatial injustice.

Whilst Monno (2016) warns that the emancipatory potential of these actions remain contested; they have made acceptable injustices visible to a much wider audience. Through these grassroots efforts, ordinary citizens are working to tackle everyday, acceptable injustices and redefine what is acceptable in urban public space.

As philosopher Iris Marion Young emphasises, in order to truly understand political activism, one must participate in it (Young, 1990; quoted in Monno, 2016). In this sense, the role of an activist planner is not to merely critique the status quo, but to be embedded and active within movements. Citizen activism alone may not trigger institutional change, reinforcing the need for planners who readily embrace an activist perspective. In doing so, urban and spatial planners can help to dismantle the 'culture of acceptable injustice' that we currently find ourselves in (Monno, 2016).

Acceptable Injustice and Defensive Design



In this instance I argue that defensive design is a form of acceptable injustice in contemporary urban space. Defensive urbanism is a broad term describing the ways in which the design of the built environment can be used as a mechanism of social control (Chellew, 2019; Ward, 2021; Rosenberger, 2019). Defensive urbanism, hostile design, hostile and unpleasant architecture, are all terms that attempt to describe the designing out of certain identities, and the prohibition of certain activities, from the public space. As Chellew argues, this distinction is important as a design can be defensive without necessarily being hostile, it can be unpleasant and uncomfortable without being explicitly hostile (Chellew, 2019). Yet even in these subtler forms, defensive urbanism perpetuates spatial injustice by shifting the boundaries of who can inhabit public space and how it can be used. Certain design interventions, thus represent a form of acceptable injustice as described by Monno, as the exclusion of some groups is justified within the framework of a 'safer,' 'more orderly,' or 'more productive' urban environment. These injustices become normalised, and the exclusion they cause goes unquestioned, as they are embedded in urban design and infrastructure.

defensive urbanism is not a new concept, being present in the earliest human settlements in the form of defensive walls, landscaping, moats, and drawbridges, all aimed at controlling access to the city.

(Cozens and Love, 2015

This 'designing out' process can manifest itself in a number of forms. As Chellew highlights, spaces can become increasingly securitised through the modification of existing design features, adding elements that alter the experience of an environment, or removing public services and amenities (Chellew, 2019, 21-22). The aforementioned defensive design practices make certain activities impossible through explicit or implicit means (Petty, 2016; Chellew 2019). Examples include anti-homelessness spikes, high-pitched sound devices to deter youth, UV lighting in public restrooms that discourage drug use, or bench dividers that prevent sleeping. These measures limit how targeted groups can physically engage with public amenities, altering their experience of the environment. Furthermore, the removal or lack of public amenities, often referred to as "ghost amenities," diminishes the purpose these spaces once served, making public areas less accommodating to everyone (Chellew 2019, 22).

How can we identify elements of hostile design, and what makes them visible or invisible to the general public? In discussing the London Spikes Controversy, Petty (2016) underscores that hostile architecture often becomes visible only during moments of public "rupture," instances where previously unnoticed design elements suddenly capture the public's attention. These are moments when the typically ambivalent public becomes acutely aware of the underlying hostility embedded in urban spaces. For individuals targeted by these designs, however, hostile elements are impossible to ignore; they shape and restrict how these individuals navigate public space. Such hostile interventions are often subtle, manifesting through changes to existing design features, additions that discourage certain activities, or even the removal of public amenities (Chellew, 2019).



HANGJONGEREN

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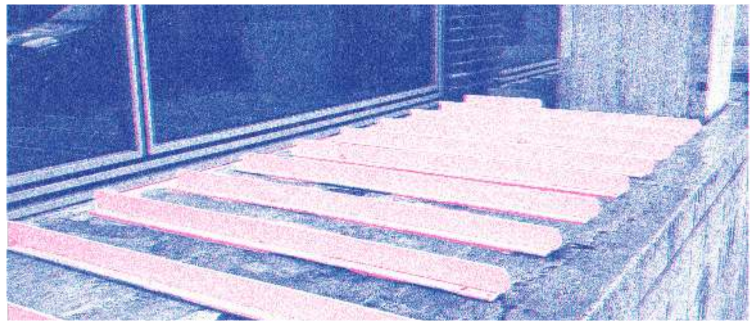
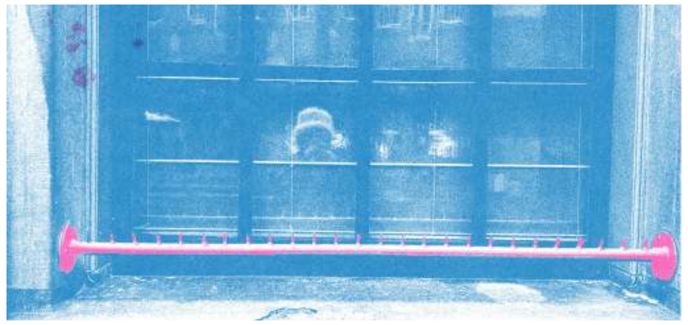
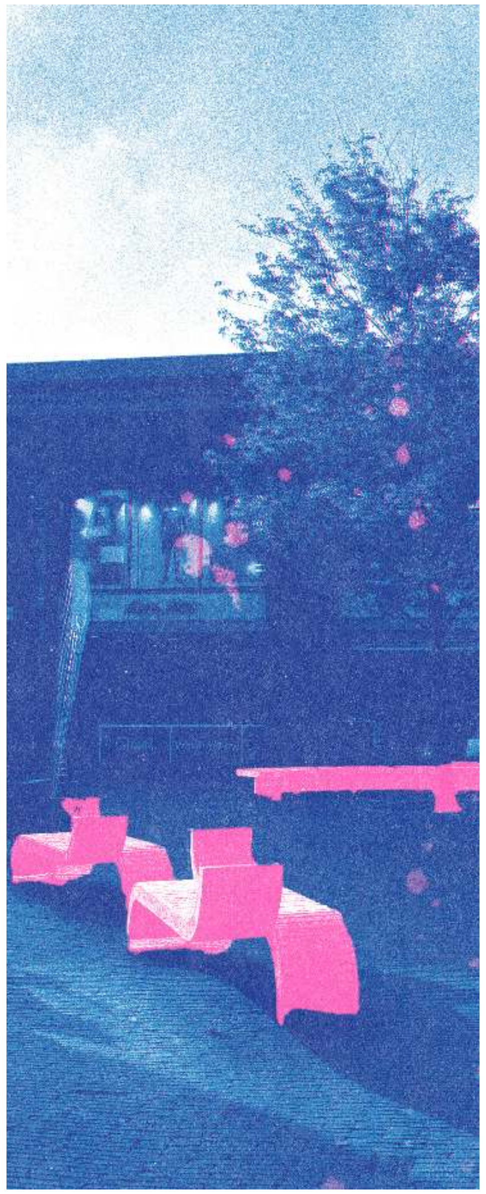
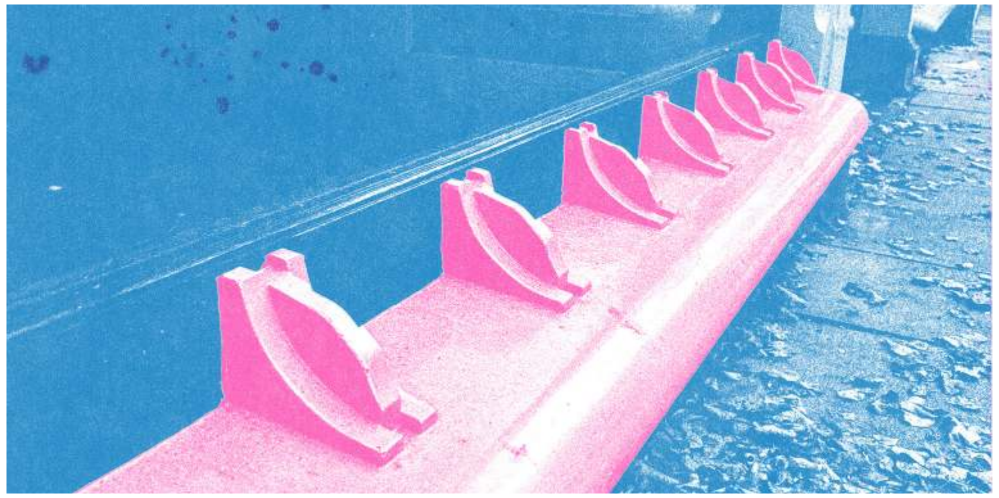
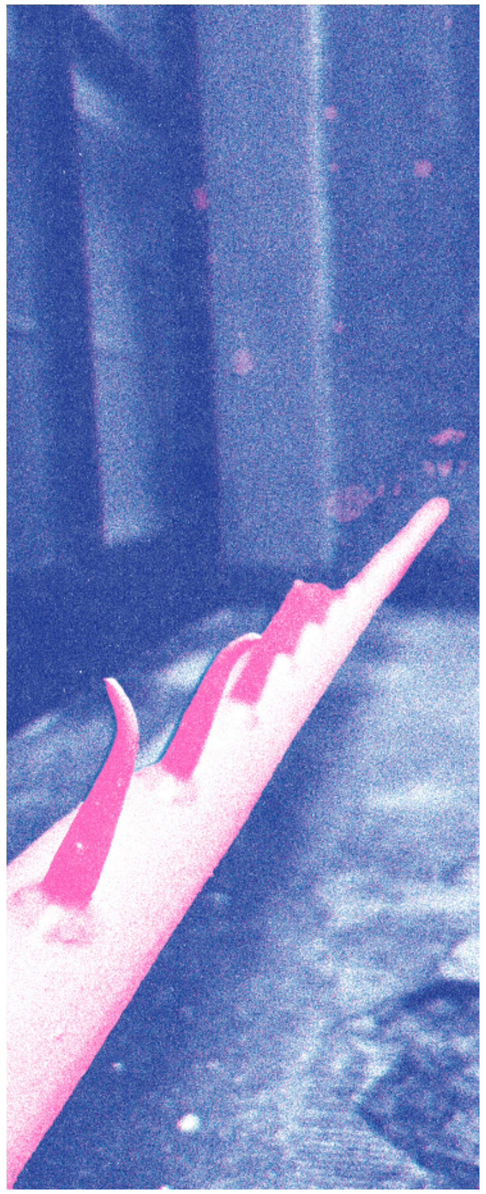
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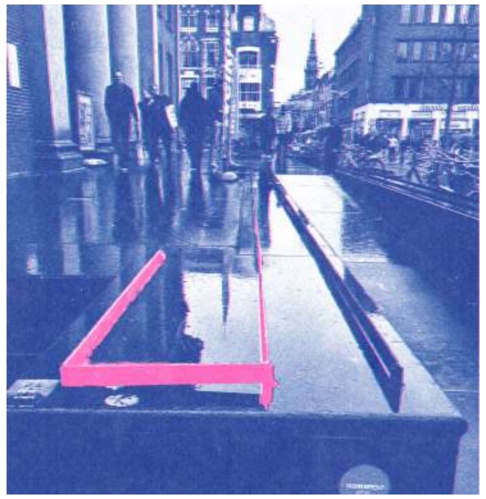
Hangjongeren is the Dutch term that describes loitering youth, typically describing teenage boys. If young people want to escape the eyes of prying adults, they need to make their own space in the urban public space (Barett, 2019). However, such youth-driven placemaking can be labelled disruptive and unsafe, and urban design interventions can be deployed to remove young people from urban space (van den Berg and Chevalier, 2018).

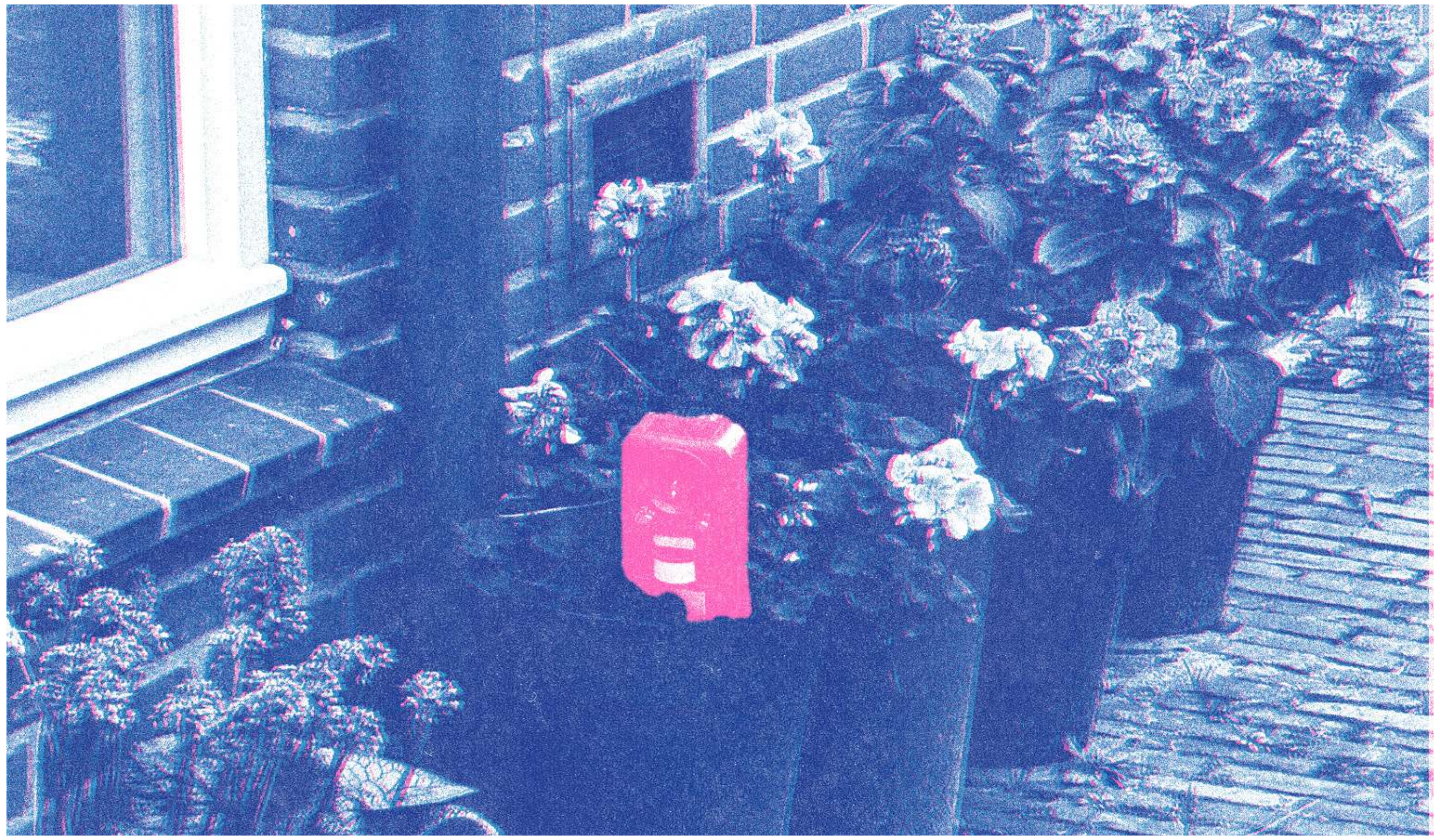
A number of design interventions can be deployed against young people, these can be both implicit (policing and community attitudes) and explicit (sonic deternets, curfews, uncomfortable seating). Whilst these interventions are mainly targeted at youth, the consequences are felt by the broader community. The lack of seating spaces impact the elderly, the lack of multi-purpose play spaces impact children, and sonic deterrents affect both resident children and pets.

Despite the use of defensive urbanism across Groningen, youth still manage to make spaces of their own. Hangjongeren transform spaces into informal hangout locations, repurposing porches and underpasses into spaces of social interaction. The presence of 'out of place' young people, appropriating porches and children's playgrounds, is a subtle act of resistance, using their bodies to assert their right to the city and make use of the city's spaces. Whether it's designated to them or not.

(see next page for examples)

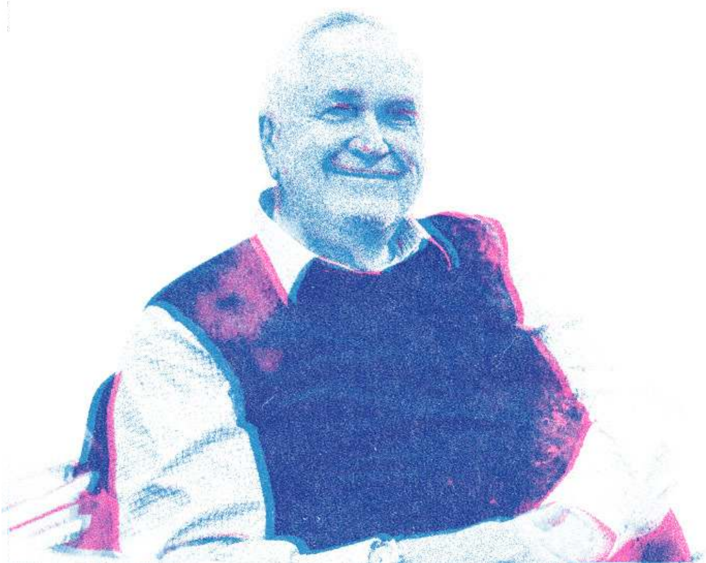





SPATIAL JUSTICE
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Broadly speaking, spatial justice entails the fair and equitable distribution of socially valued resources and opportunities in space (Soja, 2009). Spatial justice does not seek to replace other theories on justice, rather it provides a critical spatial perspective (Soja, 2009). Spatial justice seeks to ensure that all groups can exercise Lefebvre's idea of the "Right to the City" by being recognized and having a real influence on decisions about urban spaces (Dlabac et al., 2022). Fainstein (2014) outlines the three core principles underpinning spatial justice; diversity (respecting group differences without oppression), equity (which promotes a fair distribution of benefits across social classes), and democracy (only to the extent it supports the prior goals).

Soja



Fainstein



planning for justice? or just planning?

Planning for justice demands a commitment to equity, diversity, and democratic values. Yet, as cities become more diverse, such diversity is met with two responses: attempts to control difference or efforts to celebrate it (Madanipour, 1998). Defensive design interventions reflect the former, attempting to control the diversity present in public spaces. This dichotomy raises a fundamental question: should planners actively advocate for justice by embracing urban diversity, as Fainstein suggests? Or should they simply fulfil their professional duties without challenging the status quo?

Planning is political, and infrastructure is not neutral; it embodies and reinforces societal ideologies. To "just plan" is to ignore this reality and potentially perpetuate injustices. Planning for justice, then, is not optional; it is a professional responsibility to challenge exclusionary norms and to advocate for spaces where diversity can flourish.



A Plea to Planners Reading

Justice is a complex and ambiguous concept, further complicated by the 'power of representation' dilemma (Giamarino et al., 2022; Uitermark and Nicholls, 2017). Planners, equipped with specialised training, hold significant power in shaping social and spatial justice. However, it is exactly this power that distances them from the communities they aim to represent. Planners then have a choice to make: do they apply their expertise according to their own vision of justice, or do they prioritise the perspectives of communities they represent, even if these differ from their predetermined ideals of justice (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2017).

Different approaches to this dilemma produce distinct tradeoffs; as seen with the universalist (Fainstein), democratic socialist (Soja), collaborative (Healey), and insurgent (Miraftab) approaches. As each approach prioritises different values and ideals, other voices, interests, or ideals must be sacrificed in the process. Thus, representation always requires planners to elevate the views and values of some groups over others (Uitermark and Nicholls, 2017). In light of this, Uitermark and Nicholls advocate the adoption of a realpolitik of social justice, in which planners recognise that there is no perfect justice solution (2017; 34). Embracing a realpolitik of social justice, thus entails approaching each situation with considerations of the context and surrounding circumstances, rather than being dogmatic about ideological or moral justice conceptions.

However, while Uitermark and Nicholls examine multiple dimensions of this representation dilemma, they pay limited attention to the role of situated knowledge within planning itself. As Giamarino's work reminds us, planning as a discipline is almost entirely located in male, Western, institutional thought (Giamarino et al., 2022). Foundational planning texts rarely (explicitly) discuss the idea of justice (Giamarino et al., 2022). Within the discipline of planning, citational structures exist in which certain perspectives and experiences are recognized as more authoritative and valuable than others. Sara Ahmed, a feminist scholar who writes about citational practice, emphasises how such "citational structures" reproduce inequality (Ahmed, 2010). When men continually cite other men's work, they reinforce a narrow worldview that marginalises alternative voices and perspectives (Ahmed, 2010). In urban and spatial planning research, it is essential to recognise that the field's androcentric, Western lens may limit our understandings of urban life and spatial justice.

For activist planners and researchers, this means undertaking a self-audit. Based on five years of research and practical experience, there are a few steps that I always try to undertake:

1. Embrace your own positionality and be reflexive: Acknowledge how your own identity and experiences influence your understanding, and seek to learn from those outside your personal experience and worldview. honest about it.

2. Be critical; go beyond the mainstream assumptions within planning. Recognize that certain voices may have been sidelined in favour of maintaining a specific, often narrow, worldview.

3. Challenge normative citational praxis: look to the work of scholars like Wright and Wiley et al. (2022), who embrace a feminist citational praxis, one that challenges academic norms.

> We need to be 'intentional about who we read, who we cite, and whose voices we amplify form our feminist citational praxis'
>
> (Wright and Wiley et al., 2022; 134)



PLANNERS TOOLKIT

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PLANNERS TOOLKIT

This section explores how we can identify hostile elements in our urban environments, and provides some creative examples of how activists, and activist planners, globally have creatively intervened to (re)claim the space and make justice unacceptable.

PLANNERS TOOLKIT

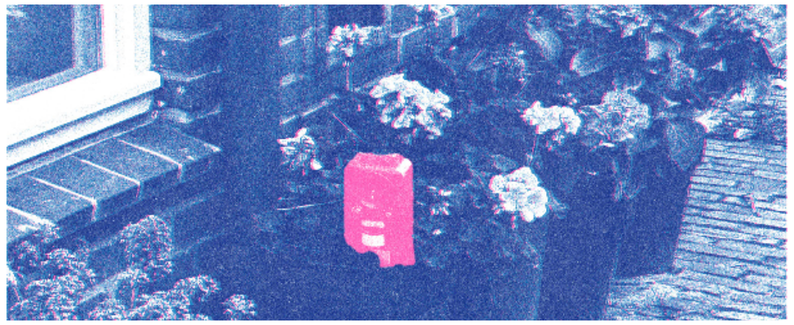
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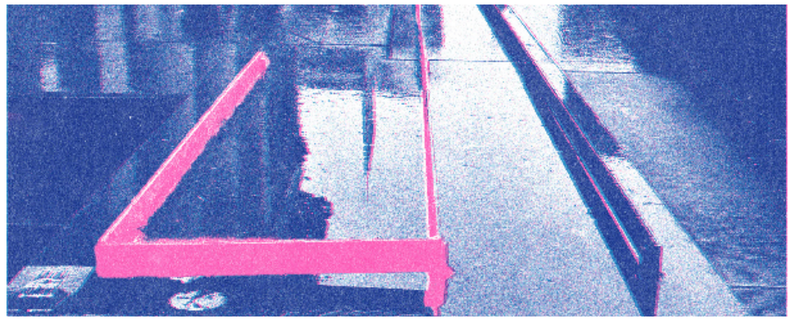
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Hostile Design 4 Key Questions

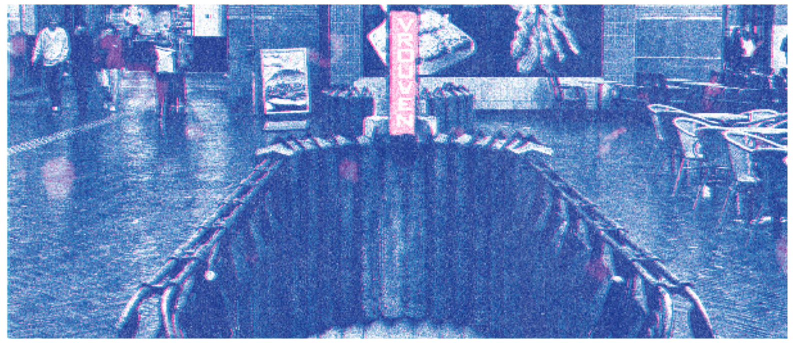
Sensory Deterrents
Ask: Does this element produce unexpected sounds, lights, or textures?
Look For: High-pitched sounds, UV lighting, or textures that create discomfort, often aimed at deterring





Functional Limitations
Ask: Does this feature limit typical public activities or behaviours?
Look For: Dividers on benches (prevent lying down), sloped surfaces, or features that restrict movement (like skating).

Missing Amenities
Ask: Are basic amenities like seating, restrooms, or water fountains absent?
Look For: Lack of usual public resources (these "ghost amenities" can indicate efforts to make a space less welcoming).





Targeted Impact
Ask: Who would be most affected by this design? Who wouldn't be impacted?
Look For: Features that seem neutral to most but directly affect marginalised groups like the homeless or youth.

In order to counteract this increasing securitisation of public space under neoliberalism, there's a number of actions we can take. The first step is making them visible; as once we recognise and notice these defensive design interventions, they become impossible to ignore. In response to broader erasure of public space, some planners, activists, and creatives are reclaiming and reshaping public spaces through innovative, body-focused, and socially-driven movements. The body itself is a tool increasingly used by activists to expose the vulnerabilities imposed by neoliberal urban restructuring (Monno, 2016). As highlighted by Phadke and Khan, activists are occupying public spaces directly, challenging ideas of acceptable citizenship by simply being present and existing in urban public space (2013; 2014). In being present in the public space, we can see how spaces are shaped to exclude and marginalise, by examining the activities that these spaces make possible.

Examples of such movements include Instagram movements like @PublicSpace_Detective and @Dutch_Hostile_Design, who raise awareness of hostile design both online and by stickering infrastructures that they deem to be (un) friendly. Platforms like @Build_Lab_ on Instagram and Mendertainment on Youtube, go even further by taking guerilla actions to repair, transform, or destroy defensive design elements in an effort to 'reuse public space as an act of togetherness' (B*U*I*L*D*lab, 2024). In doing so, design interventions go from those that prohibit human interaction, to those that facilitate human behaviour and interaction, creating spaces that support rather than control. Even nature responds with its own remedies; some birds have started repurposing anti-bird spikes into nesting material.

To foster truly public spaces, urban planners must advocate for more inclusive infrastructure, support creative resistance movements, and recognize the value of the diverse bodies present in public spaces. By aligning urban design with the needs of all, not just the economically productive, planners can create cities that reflect diversity, equity, and democracy; all of which are essential for achieving spatial justice (Fainstein, 2014). In embracing spatial justice principles and challenging the neoliberal status quo, planners can help dismantle the "acceptable injustices" embedded in today's urban landscapes and make room for spaces in which everyone can belong.



To quote Jane Jacobs:

The tolerance, the room for great differences among neighbours---differences that often go far deeper than differences in colour-which are possible and normal in intensely urban life, but which are so foreign to suburbs and pseudo suburbs, are possible and normal only when streets of great cities have built-in equipment allowing strangers to dwell in peace together on civilised but essentially dignified and reserved terms.

1961: 72

thanks for reading.

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